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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KINSHASA 001068

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SUBJECT: ITURI UPDATE: MILITIA RETAKES CONTROL OF TCHEI

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Classified By: PolOff CBrown, reasons 1.4 b/d.

¶1. (C) Summary: The militia group Front for Patriotic Resistance in Ituri (FRPI) has retaken control of the village of Tchei south of Bunia, nearly six weeks after the Armed Forces of the DRC (FARDC) and MONUC had driven the militia out of the location. As has happened in prior military encounters, the FARDC troops abandoned their positions when lacking immediate support from MONUC peacekeepers and facing a strong opponent. The militia, meanwhile, continues to attack FARDC positions elsewhere in Ituri District. End summary.

¶2. (C) Nearly six weeks after being driven out of Tchei by joint FARDC-MONUC operations (reftel), the Front for Patriotic Resistance in Ituri (FRPI) militia retook the town June 30 in a series of intense firefights with the FARDC. According to internal MONUC military reports, fighting between FRPI militia members and the 811th FARDC Brigade began June 29, with militia attacking from positions south and southwest of Tchei. During that battle, the militia reportedly suffered heavy casualties (exact numbers being unknown), while 12 FARDC soldiers were killed and 18 others were wounded. MONUC reports that by the evening of June 29, some elements of the FARDC had abandoned their positions and withdrawn to the nearby village of Kagaba (about 18 miles south of Bunia), allowing the FRPI to capture a portion of Tchei. MONUC peacekeepers from South Africa had been stationed in Tchei to help secure the area, but were redeployed June 26 to other locations in Ituri District.

¶3. (C) According to MONUC and FARDC officers, fighting continued in Tchei into June 30. By the end of the day, MONUC airborne observation teams discovered that the FARDC had abandoned almost all its positions around Tchei, including strategic hilltop locations. Colonel Richard Mungura, commander of the 811th Brigade, reportedly said the militia his troops were fighting was heavily reinforced, and thus ordered his troops to withdraw so as not to suffer further casualties. Reports to MONUC from civilians in the region indicated that FARDC soldiers were seen evacuating to Nyakunde and Marabo (approximately 17 miles southwest of Bunia). Mungura reported that July 1 he had redeployed his troops to the village of Kodeza (approximately 23 miles southwest of Bunia), but the FARDC was still coming under fire from the militia. By the evening of June 30, Tchei was reportedly under full militia control. FARDC commanders reported that the villages of Tchekele, Bavi, Medu and Songolo (nearly 14 miles south of Bunia) also fell to the FRPI.

¶4. (C) FARDC officials reported to MONUC that morale among

troops stationed in Tchei was extremely low, as the soldiers had not received pay, food or other support since capturing the town May 21. One FARDC officer said the brigade was told they were only going to stay in Tchei for seven days after the operation. Brigade commanders had reportedly asked for replacements, but their requests were apparently ignored. MONUC military observers (MILOB) reported that FARDC soldiers retreating from Tchei alleged that MONUC was supporting the militias, and subsequently threatened to attack the MILOB's vehicle.

¶15. (C) FARDC and MONUC officials reported that the bulk of the militia attack originated from the area around Mount Hoyo (approximately 40 miles southwest of Bunia). On June 25, the FARDC launched a successful offensive operation to capture the area from the FRPI. The militia, however, reportedly retreated to the caves around Mount Hoyo for a period of time to regroup and rearm before launching the attack on Tchei.

¶16. (C) In response to the militia attacks, MONUC and the FARDC have put additional forces on standby and are taking extra security precautions around Bunia. One company of MONUC South African peacekeepers has been deployed to Kagaba to reinforce FARDC positions. All MONUC contingents in Bunia have been ordered to stand up quick reaction forces to respond to any future incidents. In addition, all MONUC peacekeepers in Ituri have been ordered to be on standby for deployment to Bunia and areas south to reinforce MONUC and FARDC positions. FARDC Ituri Operations Commander General Nsiona told PolOff July 3 he and his commanders were currently planning military operations to retake Tchei. Nsiona said FARDC troops were being deployed to the Tchei area in anticipation of future operations.

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¶17. (C) Meanwhile, the FRPI militia on July 1-2 attacked FARDC positions at Avi Heights (approximately 25 miles southwest of Bunia). On July 1, the FARDC company at Avi Heights came under fire from militia forces and called for MONUC reinforcements. A patrol of MONUC Bangladeshi peacekeepers was deployed from nearby Aveba, after which a two-hour firefight ensued. The FARDC suffered 13 injured during the battle, but retained control of their position. The following morning on July 2, FARDC commanders again called for MONUC support after militia again attacked their location. Another MONUC patrol was sent to Avi Heights, along with one attack helicopter to provide close air support. MONUC reports that after a one hour exchange of fire, the situation was stabilized, and MONUC peacekeepers initiated domination patrols throughout the area.

¶18. (C) Comment: The retaking of Tchei by the FRPI demonstrates the Ituri militias are still a formidable military opponent for the FARDC, despite the large number of militia members who have surrendered in recent weeks. While Tchei itself is not a strategic military location, the village carries significant psychological value as it has long been a militia stronghold. Its recapture by the FRPI could likely renew militia activity after a series of military setbacks. Moreover, this operational failure points again to the lack of training and discipline of the Congolese military. Underequipped and unable to operate without MONUC support, the FARDC in Ituri is largely unable to react to any immediate security demands. This inability to act independently further stretches and strains MONUC, which must deploy its forces to areas where the FARDC should be providing security. End comment.
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